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->From the Editor's Keyboard

"Saying it like it is!"

"-----"

Wow, it's August 1st already! The summer is halfway gone already! It seems like just the other day that... Time flies...

Have you been paying attention to the on-again, off-again Chinese antics regarding the Olympics and their censorship of various web sites. And the spying of guests' hotel rooms, etc.? If I recall, part of the deal that allowed China to get the Summer Olympics was no internet censorship. Then China enacts all kinds of censorship, and now they've back-pedaled a little bit. Personally, China should never have been allowed to host the games. Their continued human rights violations is more than reason enough to disqualify them. Add to that their continued tyranny and oppression of its people. Sure, let's reward them by allowing them to be the host country for the Olympics!

It's the internet censorship that surprises me. How difficult would that be to enforce, and keep quiet? The world will be in China for the Games; will there be a "secondary" purpose to report on Chinese politics and domestic abuses? Possibly. If they're so concerned about what the world will learn about the country, why bother putting yourself in the position to entertain such possibilities?!

Anyway, the Olympics start next week, and I'll probably watch some of the events. World competition, on an amateur basis, is enjoyable to watch.

Until next time...

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->In This Week's Gaming Section - Virtual Gridiron Is Early!
"-----" Game Animals Will Attack!
Space Invaders Worldwar!

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Animals Attack in 'Hail to the Chimp'

The video-game universe is bursting with cuddly animals. Characters like Sonic the Hedgehog, Crash Bandicoot, Ratchet, Daxter, Sly Cooper and the entire Pokemon family have built solid careers on a mix of athleticism and adorability. And they're all much cuter than their real-life counterparts.

What happens, though, when animals attack? When they stop playing nice and become the remorseless killing machines they really are?

Someday, perhaps, we'll see a video game in which the beasts overthrow their human oppressors and take over the world. Until then, we can watch them beat up on each other, and hope they aren't developing the skills to turn the tables on us.

* "Hail to the Chimp" (Gamecock, for the Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, \$39.99): The concept behind this satirical party game is perfect for this political year. The lion has been dethroned as king of the jungle, and the rest of the animals have decided to embrace democracy. The race for the presidency involves dashing from one primary to the next, beating up your opponents and trying to collect the most clams. Not too different from the real thing.

In the game, however, you are literally beating on the competition - which could be a lot more fun if the design of "Hail to the Chimp" was a lot sharper. Four candidates are plopped into an arena, where they scramble around and slug each other until one grabs a certain number of clams. It's essentially a button-mashing festival, with little strategy involved.

The battles are broken up by parody newscasts with an anchor who sounds a bit like Dan Rather. The jokes are heavy-handed, though, and don't get much funnier the second or 10th time you hear them. "Hail to the Chimp" deserves credit for an original premise, but the execution is so sloppy that it doesn't deserve your vote. One-half star out of four.

* "Happy Tree Friends: False Alarm" (Sega, for the Xbox 360, \$10): "Happy Tree Friends" has been one of the most popular cartoons on the Internet since its debut in 2000. Don't let your children watch it, though: The series' creators revel in the gruesome dismemberment of their winsome woodland creatures.

In the PETA-baiting "False Alarm," you have to help Giggles the chipmunk, Toothy the beaver and the rest of the cast navigate a series of levels. If you slip up, though, they're likely to get crushed, poisoned or ground into hamburger. You can burn the animals to make them move faster or freeze them to make them stand still, and you can flip switches or explode obstacles to clear the path.

Sure, it's more fun to watch one or two get disemboweled, but you can still win if only a few of the creatures make it to the finish line. The major drawbacks to "False Alarm" are that it's too easy and it's too short; a decent gamer can get through it in a couple of hours. For those

with a sadistic sense of humor, it's probably worth the ten bucks. Two stars.

* "Final Fantasy Fables: Chocobo's Dungeon" (Square Enix, for the Wii, \$39.99): The chocobo - a sort of human-size chicken - is the unofficial mascot of Square's long-running "Final Fantasy" series. While the birds are generally benign, they do have a mean kick that can efficiently shred monsters. Still, the chocobo in this kid-friendly game is so sweet that you may start dreaming about seeing him turning on a spit.

In this adventure, Chocobo has landed in a town called Lostime where all the residents are having their memories stolen. A baby savant can open portals to the dungeons where the memories are being stored, so Chocobo can rush in and recover them. Unfortunately, the dungeons, which are randomly generated each time you enter one, are dull, without much variety from one to the next.

On the plus side, Chocobo can learn new skills with experience and can even switch between primary "jobs." For example, as a white mage he can easily heal himself; as a black mage he can conjure powerful offensive spells. "Chocobo's Dungeon" is far too cutesy to satisfy "FF" veterans, but it does have more depth than you'd expect from an introductory role-playing game. Two-and-a-half stars.

Gamers Hit The Virtual Gridiron Early

Although the future team colors of quarterback Brett Favre are unknown, when the 20th Anniversary "Madden NFL 09" game is released in August he will be wearing the Green Bay Packers' colors on the cover.

Football fans can put him on any team without having to wait for the official season kickoff on September 4.

EA Sports is celebrating two decades of video game football with the release of "Madden NFL 09: 20th Anniversary Special Collector's Edition," which includes full versions of the new "Madden" game, as well as the new "NFL Head Coach 09" strategy game and bonus video content.

"The launch of this year's title is of a magnitude that only the Rose Bowl can accommodate," said Peter Moore, president of EA Sports.

"Maddenpalooza, a games and music festival, will take place on August 11th in Pasadena, and approximately 10,000 fans are expected at the stadium to get their hands on the game and hear bands like Good Charlotte play."

The "Madden" franchise has been the number one selling sports franchise in North America for six years. Since its inception, Electronic Arts has sold over 70 million units of the game worldwide. This year's version has more than 85 new features, the most ever for the franchise in one year.

"It seems like every year Madden gets more and more realistic," said Miami Dolphin Jake Long. "When I watch someone playing 'Madden,' it's like I'm watching a real NFL game. The guys look so realistic and the features keep getting better."

The football simulations are getting so realistic on consoles like

PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360 that NFL rookies like Atlanta Falcons quarterback Matt Ryan said players can use the game as part of their preparation for the real sport.

"Madden does give you a feel for who some of the good players are," said Ryan. "The ratings and the rankings are pretty accurate. You may know from playing Madden that I need to watch out for that guy."

Each year, NFL players pick up a copy of the game to check out "Madden" player ratings.

College players, who don't have the luxury of seeing their names or likenesses in "NCAA Football 09" because of NCAA restrictions, use that game franchise to keep their competitive edge.

"I know with Tennessee last year I'd actually play the video game before going to the field," said Philadelphia Eagles wide receiver Deshaun Jackson. "It's good to be able to know the players you're going to be playing against. Playing the video game was part of my preparation."

Indianapolis Colts Coach Tony Dungy, who guided his team to a Super Bowl Championship in 2007, believes the new "NFL Head Coach 09" game will appeal to the arm-chair quarterbacks who play fantasy football and tracks the NFL all season long.

"They're going to really have fun with this game because they're going to be able to explore the ins and outs and the behind-the-scenes stuff," said Dungy.

EA Sports is making sure fans who buy all versions of their new football games can interact across titles. Players from the college game can be imported to the NFL game. And gamers who play EA Sports Fantasy Football can download their fantasy rosters into "Madden" and play with that team in-game.

Those looking for a more mature-rated take on football can pick up Midway Games "Blitz: The League II," an arcade-style game featuring former New York Giants linebacker Lawrence Taylor that explores the grittier side of the sport - minus the NFL license. EA Sports has the NFL license locked up through 2012.

Space Invaders Worldwar Pits USA Against Japan

To celebrate the 30th anniversary of Space Invaders an online battle between the US and Japan is brewing in a new game called Space Invaders Worldwar. The game is very different from what you may have played on your Atari back in the day.

Rather than a triangle, you move left and right across the bottom of the screen, the new online version of the game has invaders flying at you from different locations around the screen. You use the mouse to place a crosshair on the invaders and blow them up. The goal is to reach a specific amount of kills in 30 seconds to progress.

The Japan vs. US tournament is being held from July 30th to August 26th. The game is free to play and requires no download. The game is Flash based. Desktop wallpapers are also being offered that go along with the

game.

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A-ONE's Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

Cuil Stumbles Out of the Gate

Cuil, the latest search engine startup to come out swinging from its corner with the hope of knocking out Google, is instead taking a beating that could do it long-term damage as a credible contender.

The company received broad media coverage on Monday, primarily because it has former Google engineers on its team and because of its claim to have the world's largest search index, but Cuil is now facing an angry backlash.

The site has had performance and availability problems throughout the day, and a growing chorus of search market observers has declared the engine's results to its queries unimpressive.

In addition, the site has launched with only a Web search engine, at a time when it's considered a basic requirement for any search engine with aspirations of competing against Google to have at least some basic vertical search tabs for news articles, photos, maps and local business information.

Without the ability to collate general search results with photos, news articles, the increasingly popular video files and mapping information, a search engine is effectively unable to provide the type of "universal" search results that have become de riguer and that Google now consistently does.

In short, what looked like a successfully architected public-relations launch is backfiring because the product has failed to meet the lofty expectations that were created.

Backed by reputable investors that have reportedly invested \$33 million in it, Cuil will now have to go into damage control instead of riding the early momentum, and hope that end-users and industry observers will give it another chance once it works out its kinks.

"First impressions count a lot," said industry analyst Greg Sterling of Sterling Market Intelligence, who on Monday morning was unable to give Cuil a thorough test because of the site's performance problems.

While Cuil could become an interesting alternative to Google and the other major search engines, that will take some time. In hindsight, it might have been wiser for Cuil's management to launch the site more quietly and give themselves time to improve it, Sterling said.

Instead, by making a big, noisy media splash, they gave themselves little room for error. "This much media coverage creates high expectations," he said.

Indeed, Cuil came out with an in-your-face attitude, claiming to have the largest Web index of any search engine: 120 billion Web pages, which Cuil states is "three times more than any other search engine." It was a point that its officials made in interviews with media outlets prior to Monday's debut.

But the site seemed unable to handle some softball, straight-forward queries. For example, a search for "barack obama" returned on the first page of results mostly links to different pages of Obama's official site, hardly useful if one is looking for a variety of sites on the presidential candidate. A search for "St. Louis, MO" initially returned zero results.

Among others, search engine expert Danny Sullivan criticized Cuil for focusing on the size of its index - a practice that fell into disfavor years ago, as engines focused on the quality of results - and questioned the basic validity of the claim.

"Yes, size matters. You want to have a comprehensive collection of documents from across the web. But having a lot of documents doesn't mean you are most relevant," Sullivan wrote on his Search Engine Land blog.

Sullivan also pointed out that Google hasn't publicly stated the size of its Web index in years, and that even if Cuil's is indeed three times as big, Google could quickly match that by simply becoming a bit less selective. Last Friday, Google, likely anticipating Cuil's launch on Monday, said its crawlers today "see" more than 1 trillion URLs on the Web.

Google declined to comment about Cuil's claim and also declined to say how many links are in its Web index.

Sullivan and other search market observers said they were underwhelmed by the quality of Cuil's results.

"With the huge caveat that nine queries are far from letting anyone conclude anything, I still didn't come away with a sense that Cuil has Google-beating relevancy. Instead, it has some flaws though is better than many start-up search engines appear out of the box," Sullivan wrote in another post Monday.

"I played with the site a fair bit when it turned on this morning. So far it doesn't do much for me," wrote Saul Hansell of The New York Times in a blog post titled "Cuil's New Search Engine: Cheaper Than Google, but Not Better."

Cuil, which is pronounced "cool," got a resounding thumbs-down from The Wall Street Journal's John Paczkowski in an AllThingsD post titled *Totally UnCuil*.

"If your mission is to beat Google in the search market, it's probably wise to give your upstart search engine a name that people know how to pronounce. It's also wise to make sure that it appears in the first page of search results for its own name. Cuil, the upstart search engine that debuted today with aspirations of unseating Google, has apparently done

neither," he wrote.

He's not alone in his dislike for the company's name. IDC analyst Caroline Dangson flagged the name - she called it "terrible" - as one of what she considers the company's main challenges.

"Cuil has an uphill battle in getting more consumers to search its site instead of Google. Google wins hands down for brand recognition among U.S. consumers," she said via e-mail, adding that using Google has become a habit for a majority of search users.

According to a recent IDC survey, three-quarters of U.S. online consumers know Google as an Internet brand and the majority like Google and believe it offers quality services, she said.

"Furthermore, Google also already has an established business model based on search advertising in which it excels. Even if Cuil offers better search results, the company is not monetizing its service with advertising at this point and will not be able to compete with Google in terms of revenue," she said.

Of course, on Monday, Cuil's problems were much more serious than offering better results, considering how shaky its performance has been. At close to 5 p.m. Eastern Time the site was still returning error results, saying it couldn't process queries because its servers were overloaded.

Yahoo To Face Shareholder Wrath at Annual Meeting

Yahoo Inc.'s recent truce with investor Carl Icahn didn't pacify many shareholders who remain on the war path heading into the Internet company's annual meeting Friday.

The slings and arrows are expected to include a significant number of votes opposing the re-election of the company's current board of directors and a fusillade of criticism.

Yahoo Chief Executive Jerry Yang, in particular, will probably get an earful after spurning a \$47.5 billion takeover bid from Microsoft Corp. in early May.

Since Microsoft withdrew that offer, Yahoo's stock price has plunged 30 percent to leave the company's market value nearly \$20 billion below what shareholders would have been paid if Yang and the rest of the board had accepted the bid.

"The Microsoft negotiations were just the latest example of the negligence by this board," said Eric Jackson, a Yahoo shareholder who plans to confront Yang during Friday's meeting. "There is still a lot of anger and frustration among shareholders right now."

Jackson, who represents a group of stockholders with about 3.2 million shares, made an impression at Yahoo's meeting last year when he ripped the performance of then-CEO Terry Semel. Just six days after that skewering, Semel stepped down as CEO and surrendered the reins to Yang, Yahoo's co-founder.

Yahoo shareholders were agitated even before the breakdown in Microsoft talks because the company's profits and stock have been sinking for several years, despite an Internet advertising boom.

Since 2005, Yahoo has lost nearly half its market value. Meanwhile, the stock of rival Google Inc. has climbed 15 percent to create an additional \$20 billion in shareholder wealth.

Yahoo shares fell 14 cents Thursday to \$19.89, slightly above their price when Microsoft made its initial takeover bid six months ago.

If there's a loud enough outcry Friday, Yahoo shareholder Mark Nelson thinks Yang may end his attempt to turn around the company that he and David Filo began 14 years ago.

"I haven't spoken to anyone who thinks, 'Hey, this is the right team to lead Yahoo,'" said Nelson, a partner at Mithras Capital, which owns 1.7 million Yahoo shares. "I hope there will be enough shareholder pressure at this meeting for the board to realize they need to bring in someone else to run the company."

Icahn, a blunt billionaire who will join Yahoo's board next week as part of his compromise with the company, already has said Yang, 39, should be cast aside for a more seasoned CEO. That idea may get more support when two Icahn allies join the Yahoo board by Aug. 15. (Shareholders won't be able to vote on the merits of Icahn and his allies until next year's meeting. Friday's vote will be confined to Yahoo's incumbent board.)

Before he decided to work with Yahoo, Icahn had been campaigning to replace all nine of the company's directors with a slate of his own candidates. But he changed his mind in July after concluding he didn't have enough shareholder support to prevail.

Icahn remains highly motivated to boost Yahoo's stock price because he paid about \$25 per share to acquire a 5 percent stake in the company. But he doesn't plan to show up at the annual meeting. And now he seems willing to give Yang more time to prove he has the chops to be CEO - although his peace pact with the company now prevents him from publicly disparaging Yang or other Yahoo directors.

"While we still disagree on many points, I have great hope 'this will be the beginning of a beautiful friendship,'" Icahn wrote on his blog Thursday.

To round out its board, Yahoo must choose two Icahn-endorsed candidates from a list of nine. Two of the choices have been mentioned as possible successors to Yang - former AOL CEO Jonathan Miller and former Viacom Inc. CEO Frank Biondi Jr.

But Yang still seems to believe he is the best man for the job.

"I am as excited as I have ever been to lead this company," Yang told The Associated Press on July 22. "We have a sense of urgency to create value." In his defense Friday, Yang is expected to highlight an advertising partnership with Google that is supposed to boost Yahoo's annual revenue by \$800 million. That alliance still could be blocked by antitrust regulators.

Yang also thinks Yahoo can get better at selling ads on its own.

Add it all up, and Yang believes Yahoo's net revenue will climb from a

projected \$5.6 billion this year to more than \$9 billion in 2010. Industry analysts are highly skeptical: They predict Yahoo's 2010 revenue will be just slightly above \$7 billion.

Yang won't be alone on the firing line Friday.

Roy Bostock, who became Yahoo's chairman on the same day Microsoft made its initial bid, oversaw the failed negotiations that followed. Bostock also sits on a compensation committee that approved an employee severance plan that threatens to substantially increase the costs of a takeover.

Two shareholder advisory firms - Glass, Lewis & Co. and Proxy Governance - have recommended voting against Bostock as well as the two other directors on the compensation committee, Ron Burkle and Arthur Kern. However, RiskMetrics ISS, the most influential shareholder advisory firm, supports re-electing the entire board.

A director opposed by a majority of shareholders is required to submit a letter to resignation to Yahoo. But the company doesn't have to accept the resignation, creating the possibility that a director could remain on the board against shareholder wishes.

In an attempt to placate investors, Yahoo might announce a special dividend or some other extraordinary measure, such as a spinoff of its Asian assets. Microsoft proposed both ideas in July when the software maker teamed with Icahn in an attempt to buy Yahoo's search engine and break up the rest of the business.

Yahoo Board Emerges Unscathed from Annual Meeting

Yahoo Inc.'s board emerged largely unscathed from the Internet company's annual meeting Friday as a subdued crowd of shareholders raised few questions about the directors' rejection of Microsoft Corp.'s \$47.5 billion takeover bid.

Some shareholders expressed displeasure by opposing the re-election of Yahoo's current directors, but the resistance wasn't as intense as last year, when three directors were rejected by more than 30 percent of the vote.

In this year's balloting, only two directors - Chairman Roy Bostock and Arthur Kern - were opposed on ballots representing at least 20 percent of Yahoo shares. Yahoo Chief Executive Jerry Yang, who steered the Microsoft negotiations with Bostock, was approved by 85 percent of the shares cast.

Many investors had already made an emphatic statement about their feelings by dumping their holdings in Yahoo shares. The company's stock price has fallen by 31 percent since Microsoft withdrew a takeover offer of \$33 per share in early May.

Much of the drama was drained from Friday's meeting last month when Yahoo reached a truce with activist investor Carl Icahn, who had been campaigning to oust the company's entire board for spurning the Microsoft bid. Icahn will join Yahoo's board next week and can't criticize his fellow directors as part of a peace pact he made. He

didn't attend Friday's meeting.

Yahoo will add two other Icahn-endorsed candidates to the board by Aug. 15. Former AOL CEO Jonathan Miller had been considered one of the leading candidates to fill the other seats, but he apparently will be precluded from doing so as part of a noncompete agreement that AOL's owner, Time Warner Inc., plans to enforce.

The provisions preventing Miller from joining an AOL rival remain in effect through March 2009, Time Warner spokesman Keith Cocozza said Friday.

Miller has been mentioned as a possible successor to Yang, who has been unable to boost the company's market value during the first 13 months of his reign.

Yahoo spokeswoman Diana Wong declined to comment on Miller's status.

Only two of the roughly 125 shareholders at Friday's meeting criticized the Microsoft negotiations. Two other shareholders said they were happy Yahoo didn't sell to Microsoft.

The rest of the shareholder remarks covered a wide range of topics, including Yahoo's human rights policies in China and the scarcity of women on its board.

Former Yahoo employee Martin Baker, who still owns 100 shares, was mostly upset that the company didn't carve out more time for shareholder questions. After Yahoo's leadership spent more than an hour defending its handling of the now-withdrawn offer and management's optimistic outlook, the company allotted about 35 minutes to field nine questions.

"It seemed like they were more interested in going to lunch than hearing from shareholders," said Baker, a San Francisco resident. "I think they controlled things pretty well."

Yahoo's biggest challenge is still ahead, given that its stock price is just slightly above where it stood six months ago when Microsoft first announced its unsolicited takeover offer.

Yang, who co-founded Yahoo 14 years ago, assured shareholders his management team is pursuing a turnaround plan in "a very deliberate and forceful manner." Yang has promised to increase Yahoo's net revenue by at least 25 percent in each of the next two years.

Bostock staunchly defended the board's handling of the Microsoft negotiations, saying the directors met more than 30 times to discuss the bid as well as other ways to boost the company's stock.

"At no point did this board or management in any way ever resist Microsoft's proposal," Bostock told shareholders. "We proactively engaged with them and tried to reach a positive conclusion for shareholders."

He also cast doubt about the validity of Microsoft's last offer, saying it was made in an "offhand comment."

Microsoft has steadfastly maintained that its general counsel specifically told a Yahoo lawyer that the company was prepared to pay \$33 per share.

In a statement Friday, Microsoft asserted that "Yahoo is attempting to rewrite history yet again with statements that are not supported by the facts."

Eric Jackson, a Yahoo shareholder representing a group of about 150 investors, called upon Bostock to step down, partly because he "overplayed" his hand in the Microsoft negotiations.

Bostock gruffly refused.

Norton Safe Web Searches Sites for Malware

Symantec on Monday opened public beta testing of a new site-reputation plug-in called Norton Safe Web.

Initially, NSW will integrate with the ongoing beta test of Norton Internet Security 2009. Users of the final NIS 2009 release will also be able to install the beta, and a winter update will add the final version for NIS 2009 users. It will also appear as a built-in feature in Norton 360 version 3, which is expected in the first quarter of 2009.

Symantec felt a need to "expand our protection to everyday consumer on-line activities," said Bill Rosenkrantz, director of product management for NSW. He noted that these days there's a big risk in just visiting a site as even good sites may be hacked. Eighty-one percent of sites flagged as suspicious by NSW actually include drive-by downloads, according to Rosenkrantz. NSW keeps users away from such sites during their ordinary searching and surfing.

Instead of crawling the web and analyzing sites the way McAfee's SiteAdvisor does, NSW relies on automatic reporting through the Norton community. Symantec has over 19 million users of Norton products who opted into the Norton Community reporting program. If one of these users experiences a drive-by download at a site, Symantec knows it immediately and NSW can warn other users.

Rosenkrantz also noted that threats can be fleeting. A site may be hacked one day, fixed the next. Or the threat may be intermittent, entering via a rotating banner ad. NSW's "intelligent aging" process looks at a site's history to determine how quickly it should be re-analyzed. A site that has been hosting known malware for a year won't get checked frequently. A site that's been clean for years but suddenly come up malicious will get priority. And the top 30,000 web sites are subject to very frequent scrutiny by human analysts, to avoid false positives.

NSW will offer green, yellow or red visual site ratings in popular search engines (Google, Yahoo!, and MSN) and will also warn users if they attempt to visit a malicious site. It will mark both "organic" and sponsored links on search pages, with a pop-up summary and link to full analysis of the site online. In addition to Symantec's analysis results the site report will include user reviews and a spot for a statement by the site owner. Symantec plans to offer a "superior dispute resolution process" for owners who believe their sites have been erroneously red-flagged.

New Browsers Fight the Malware Scourge

The latest browsers are fighting back against the never-ending assault from online crooks who want to sneak malware infections through your browser and onto your PC. Firefox 3, Opera 9.5, and, soon, Internet Explorer 8 add new security features that block known malware sites.

Today's dirty trick of choice for Net thugs is to slip nearly invisible code onto a vulnerable but benign Web site, forcing it to become an unwitting foot soldier in the malware war. A successful hijacking in July of a site for Sony PlayStation games demonstrates that sites both large and small can fall victim to this tactic, which crooks like because it can target even people who are careful about where they surf.

"The bad guys are putting a lot of effort into mass hacking," says Roger Thompson, chief research officer with antivirus maker AVG Technologies. "They routinely hack 20,000 to 40,000 sites in a day" with automated tools, he says.

The browsers have their work cut out for them, to be sure. A May report from security company ScanSafe that looked at data from its corporate customers found that their risk of encountering exploits and hijacked Web sites skyrocketed by 407 percent from May of last year. ScanSafe also found that just over two-thirds of all Web-based malware attacks came via compromised Web sites.

The new features in the latest browsers work much as existing antiphishing filters do. In Firefox 2, Mozilla uses Google's blacklist of known phishing sites. If you mistakenly click a link to a URL on that list, you'll see a warning instead of the site. Firefox 3 also blocks the display of pages on Google's list of known malware sites.

Firefox 3 grabs the most recent blacklist about every 30 minutes, according to spokesperson Johnathan Nightingale, and checks the sites you visit against that local list. Firefox 2 has an option to always check sites you visit against Google's online list so as to catch the very latest entries, but Firefox 3 provides no such option.

Opera 9.5 works in a similar fashion, but with some key differences. It adds malware-site blacklists from Haute Secure, a Seattle-based security company, to the phishing blacklists from Netcraft and Phishtank that the previous version used. Haute's list includes sites on Google's list, those the company discovers, and sites that Haute's users have submitted.

According to Christer Strand, an engineer at Opera who worked on the new feature, when you first visit a domain, the browser pulls down a sublist of any blacklisted pages or links within that domain from the latest online-stored lists. It then checks pages you visit against that small downloaded list. Opera doesn't save anything about who is visiting what domains, Strand says.

Though you can find these features in the latest Opera and Firefox now, you'll have to wait for Internet Explorer 8's similar feature. Austin Wilson, director of Windows client product management, says that IE 8's beta 2, due out in August, will employ a feature dubbed SmartScreen to block malware sites.

Wilson says Microsoft will use lists of such sites from different company partners, as it does now for the browser's antiphishing protection, but he isn't yet saying who those partners will be.

Instead of downloading all or part of the blacklist to your PC, IE 8 will check every page you visit against the online malware blacklist, Wilson says. Unlike IE 7's phishing protection--which checks for blacklist matches and also attempts to identify phishing sites at the time you visit based on a page's characteristics (such as whether it sends log-ins off to another domain)--SmartScreen will only compare against a blacklist for malware sites.

Wondering about Apple's Safari? The current browser doesn't block any malicious sites, phishing or malware, and the company is tight-lipped about whether it plans to add such features.

While these new features will help combat rampant site infections, they won't single-handedly stomp out Web-based malware any more than antiphishing measures do for that type of threat. For one thing, blacklists are inherently reactive: A site must first be identified and added to a list before it will be blocked. Even the fastest such process can leave a window of opportunity for criminals to nail victims before the blacklists catch up, just as with virus signatures. And of course, crooks still have other methods, such as e-mail and IM, to ply their nefarious trade.

"In most cases viruses spread so rapidly, and through so many methods, it's not sufficient to only employ browser protection," says Opera's Strand.

His advice for surfers? "You really need an antivirus [program] no matter what browser you're using."

Top UK Court Allows Extradition of Hacker to US

Some call it the biggest hack of military computers; perhaps it was just a big embarrassment. Gary McKinnon - accused of breaking into military and NASA computers in what he claims was a search for UFOs, allegedly causing nearly \$1 million in damage - has lost his appeal against extradition to the United States.

McKinnon, 42, an unemployed computer administrator, allegedly broke into 97 computers belonging to the U.S. Army, Navy, Air Force, and Department of Defense from a bedroom in a north London home.

His attacks between 2001 and 2002 allegedly shut down the Army district responsible for protecting Washington, and cleared logs from computers at the Naval Weapons Station Earle in New Jersey that tracks the location and battle-readiness of Navy ships.

That last attack, coming immediately after the Sept. 11, knocked out the station's entire network of 300 computers. NASA and privately owned computers also were damaged, prosecutors said, putting the total cost of his online activities at \$900,000.

At the time of his indictment, prosecutor Paul McNulty said McKinnon pulled off "the biggest hack of military computers ever - at least ever

detected."

In his defense, McKinnon, known online as SOLO, said he was trying to expose security weaknesses and uncover evidence of UFOs.

"I was a man obsessed," McKinnon wrote on The Guardian newspaper's Web site last year, describing a year spent trying to break into U.S. military systems: eight hours a day at a computer in his girlfriend's aunt's house while unkempt, drinking beer and smoking marijuana.

In interviews, he claimed that his hacking uncovered photographic proof of alien spacecraft and the names and ranks of "non-terrestrial officers."

Prosecutors accuse him of deliberately trying to intimidate the U.S. government by tearing through their networks. They pointed to a note written by McKinnon - and left on an Army computer - attacking U.S. foreign policy as "akin to government-sponsored terrorism."

"It was not a mistake that there was a huge security stand down on September 11 last year," he wrote. "I am SOLO. I will continue to disrupt at the highest levels."

McKinnon was caught in 2002 after some of the software used in the attacks was traced back to his girlfriend's e-mail account. The U.S. sought his extradition, a move his lawyer Claire Anderson claimed Wednesday was motivated by the government's desire to "make an example" of a man who humbled officials in Washington by hacking into their systems using off-the-shelf office software and a dial-up modem.

Aspects of American cyber-security had been shown up as "really shameful," with some computers not even password-protected, said Graham Cluley, a security consultant with Sophos PLC.

He said the United States appeared to be pursuing McKinnon in an effort to flex its legal muscle before the hacking community, which has watched the case with interest.

"The overriding message is: You shouldn't mess with American government and military computers, particularly right after Sept. 11," Cluley said.

McKinnon's lawyers had hoped to hold any trial in Britain, saying he could be dragged before a military tribunal or even end up at Guantanamo Bay.

In their appeals, they said McKinnon was warned by U.S. officials that he would not be allowed to serve any part of his sentence in Britain unless he agreed to cooperate with his extradition. That, they argued, amounted to an unlawful threat and abuse of process.

Not so, Britain's House of Lords said Wednesday. Lord Brown, writing for Britain's highest court, said plea bargaining could only be called an abuse of process "in a wholly extreme case."

"This is far from being such a case," he said.

While the decision exhausts McKinnon's legal options in Britain, Anderson said she would appeal to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, France. She said British authorities had agreed to keep McKinnon in Britain for at least two weeks to allow his lawyers to prepare their application.

"If that fails, then it's off to jail in America for 60 years," McKinnon told the British Broadcasting Corp. "Rapists and murderers and real terrorists get less."

Should McKinnon be extradited, he would face trial in Virginia and New Jersey on eight charges of computer fraud.

Each charge potentially carries a sentence of up to 10 years in prison and \$250,000 in fines. However, U.S. sentencing guidelines would likely recommend a much lighter sentence.

A 60-year sentence is "extraordinarily unlikely," according to Scott Christie, who was the lead prosecutor in the case in New Jersey before going into private practice.

McKinnon is charged in New Jersey and Virginia with eight counts of computer fraud. While each count potentially carries a sentence of up to 10 years in prison and \$250,000 in fines, Christie said U.S. sentencing guidelines would likely recommend a much lighter penalty.

"His general exposure would be in the range of between three and five years," he said.

Firefox Alpha Improves the AwesomeBar

Though it's been less than a month since Firefox 3's blast-off into the Internet and a software download record, Mozilla developers have already distributed a very early preview of the next upgrade to the increasingly popular browser, code-named Shiretoko.

The alpha version will be designated as Firefox 3.1 at final release and at this point is strictly intended for developers and testers. The underlying Gecko page-rendering engine is also being updated to version 1.9.1.

The most noticeable enhancements in the release involve the much lauded Smart Location Bar, often referred to by Mozillaphiles as the "AwesomeBar." Users will have more control over what links the bar presents when they start typing in it. They'll be able to restrict suggested sites to history (rather than including unvisited bookmarks) and to specify whether to find URLs or page title text. Smart keywords, for example, preceding text in the location bar with "g" to perform a Google search on the term, will now get bookmarks that enable more than one choice for the keyword (or key character).

Also implemented is a new tab-switching behavior, called Control-Tab. This lets users view tabs in a filmstrip view, offering tab previews similar to those in Opera. Formerly a Firefox add-on, Control-Tab will be a built-in feature of the browser's next version.

Other enhancements have been implemented affecting improved Web standards support in the Gecko layout engine, and support for CSS border images and JavaScript query selectors. Though none of the changes is massive, it's good to see the folks at Mozilla continually making a good product better.

Versions of Firefox 3.1 Alpha 1 are available for Windows, Mac OS X, and Linux. You can read more details about the changes on Mozilla.org.

Senator: China Spying on Internet Use in Hotels

Foreign-owned hotels in China face the prospect of "severe retaliation" if they refuse to install government software that can spy on Internet use by hotel guests coming to watch the summer Olympic games, a U.S. lawmaker said Tuesday.

Sen. Sam Brownback, R-Kan., produced a translated version of a document from China's Public Security Bureau that requires hotels to use the monitoring equipment.

"These hotels are justifiably outraged by this order, which puts them in the awkward position of having to craft pop-up messages explaining to their customers that their Web history, communications, searches and key strokes are being spied on by the Chinese government," Brownback said at a news conference.

A spokesman for the Chinese embassy in Washington did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Brownback said several international hotel chains confirmed receiving the order from China's Public Security Bureau. The hotels are in a bind, he said, because they don't want to comply with the order, but also don't want to jeopardize their investment of millions of dollars to expand their businesses in China. The hotel chains that forwarded the order to Brownback are declining to reveal their identities for fear of reprisal.

Earlier this year, the U.S. State Department issued a fact sheet warning travelers attending the Olympic games that "they have no reasonable expectation of privacy in public or private locations" in China.

"All hotel rooms and offices are considered to be subject to on-site or remote technical monitoring at all times," the agency states.

The Public Security Bureau order threatens that failure to comply could result in financial penalties, suspending access to the Internet or the loss of a license to operate a hotel in China.

"If you were a human rights advocate, if you're a journalist, you're in room 1251 of a hotel, anything that you use, sending out over the Internet is monitored in real time by the Chinese Public Security bureau," Brownback said. "That's not right. It's not in the Olympic spirit."

Brownback and other lawmakers have repeatedly denounced China's record of human rights abuses and asked President Bush not to attend the Olympic opening ceremonies in Beijing.

Brownback was introducing a resolution in the Senate on Tuesday that urges China to reverse its actions.

Some Web Sites Blocked at China Olympic Press Center

Journalists connecting to the Internet at the Beijing International Media Center (BIMC) are discovering that despite promises of an open reporting environment, China is still blocking access to some Web sites.

"I was at the BIMC this morning and I was unable to access Amnesty [International]'s site and a couple of others, including a Falun Gong site and Human Rights Watch," said Jonathan Watts, president of the Foreign Correspondents Club of China (FCCC) and a correspondent for U.K. newspaper The Guardian.

"These Internet controls are contrary to the host's promises of a free reporting environment, and they also contradict IOC assurances that reporters who come to Beijing will be able to do their job just as they were able to do so at previous Olympics. How can this be the case when they are unable to access many sites that are critical of the authorities," Watts said in an interview.

"Unfortunately this is an all too familiar experience for foreign journalists and other Internet users in China. Now thousands of visiting reporters will get to see first-hand the reality of Internet controls in China," he said.

Another reporter, speaking on condition of anonymity, confirmed that those three sites were blocked, along with the Chinese-language sites for the Voice of America and the British Broadcasting Corp., and Hong Kong-based newspaper Apple Daily.

These observations confirm earlier reports that some sites were blocked at the BIMC, the headquarters for accredited journalists for the Beijing Olympics, which begin August 8. IDG News Service in Beijing achieved the same results from a standard home Internet connection in another part of Beijing.

A representative from China Netcom, the official provider of broadband and other fixed-line telecommunications for the Olympics, including the BIMC, could not immediately be reached for comment.

China issued new regulations for foreign reporters on January 1, 2007, designed to create greater press freedom during the run-up to the Olympics. However, the FCCC said that between that date and July 8, it had logged 259 incidents of interference with reporting activities of foreign journalists in China.

In April, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) received assurances from the Beijing Organizing Committee for the Games of the XXIX Olympiad (BOCOG) that it would allow unfettered Internet access. "We were satisfied by the assurances we received across a number of areas-- media service levels, including Internet access, brand protection, environmental contingency plans for improved air quality, and the live broadcast feed," IOC Coordination Commission Chairman Hein Verbruggen said at the time.

China routinely blocks access to Web sites it deems inappropriate, including those containing pornography, violence, magic and superstition themes, and especially anti-government material, such as those critical of the Chinese Communist Party or supporting independence for Taiwan, Tibet, or Xinjiang.

China Will Censor Internet During Olympic Games

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the Chinese government confirmed Wednesday what free-speech advocates loathe to hear: Reporters covering the Olympic Games won't be able to access Web sites that China deems politically sensitive.

Internet censorship is standard for China's citizens, but China vowed seven years ago to allow journalists unfettered access during the Olympics. The backpedaling means about 20,000 reporters and technicians that will flood Beijing next week for the Olympic Games will be working with a handicap.

"The Olympic committee should have understood in the first place that censorship is a core strategy the Chinese government uses to maintain control. The IOC was naive to think China would relinquish that control, if only for a week," said Leslie Harris, president and CEO of the Center for Democracy and Technology. "It is very disappointing. I am as disappointed in the IOC as I am in China."

Reporters Without Borders is condemning the IOC's acceptance of Chinese authorities' decision to block access to certain Web sites at the Olympic Games media center in Beijing. The organization also condemns the IOC's inability to prevent this situation.

"Coming just nine days before the opening ceremony, this is yet another provocation by the Chinese authorities. This situation increases our concern that there will be many cases of censorship during the games," the organization said. "We condemn the IOC's failure to do anything about this, and we are more than skeptical about its ability to 'ensure' that the media are able to report freely."

Sun Weide, the chief spokesperson for the Beijing Organizing Committee for the Olympic Games, said the authorities would only guarantee "sufficient" Internet access for accredited media.

Beyond the Internet censorship, Chinese authorities have broken their promise to improve the country's human-rights situation and betrayed the core values of the Olympics, according to a new Amnesty International report.

In the run-up to the Olympics, Chinese authorities have locked up, put under house arrest, and forcibly removed individuals they believe may threaten the image of stability and harmony they want to present to the world, the group said.

"By continuing to persecute and punish those who speak out for human rights, the Chinese authorities have lost sight of the promises they made when they were granted the games seven years ago," said Roseann Rife, Asia-Pacific deputy director of Amnesty International.

"The Chinese authorities are tarnishing the legacy of the games," Rife said. "They must release all imprisoned peaceful activists, allow foreign and national journalists to report freely, and make further progress toward the elimination of the death penalty."

As Harris sees it, the world has not put adequate pressure on China because so many nations want to be involved with the economic engine that China has become. China is throwing its human-rights record in the face of international guests who will experience what it's like to try to communicate inside China, she said.

"I am hopeful that there will be some strong sentiments expressed by democratic countries. If that does not happen at this important moment, we will lose a critical opportunity to move China in a different direction," Harris said. "Until and unless the democratic world makes this a real issue and understands the connection between Internet freedom and the realization of human rights more broadly, China has no reason to back down."

China Lifts Some Internet Restrictions in Face of Pressure

China is once again agreeing to lift restrictions on Internet usage - at least on some sites - for journalists covering the Olympic Games.

Human-rights group Amnesty International reports that its site is accessible, but other politically sensitive sites are still blocked. The Chinese government did not issue a formal statement explaining its decision to open up access, and did not say whether such access is permanent.

"Following discussions the IOC has held with the organizers of the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games on the difficulties experienced this week in accessing some Web sites, the IOC is pleased to see that the issues are quickly being resolved," the International Olympic Committee said. "The media should be seeing a noticeable difference in accessibility to Web sites that they need to report on the Olympic Games."

Internet censorship is standard for China's citizens, but China vowed seven years ago to allow journalists unfettered access during the Olympics. On Wednesday, the IOC and the Chinese government confirmed that reporters covering the Olympic Games would not be able to access sites China deems politically sensitive.

The IOC and China both came under fire. On Friday, the IOC began to try to repair the damage.

"The IOC has always encouraged the Beijing 2008 organizers to provide media with the fullest access possible to report on the games, including access to the Internet, knowing this is important for them to do their job," the organization said. "This access has always been assured by BOCOG [the Beijing Olympic organizing committee] and the Chinese authorities, and the IOC is pleased to see these are assurances being upheld."

Reporters Without Borders reported that its Web site, which has been blocked in China since 2003, can now be accessed at the Olympic press center in Beijing and in other parts of the capital, and in Shanghai.

"This is good news, of course, but it continues to be unacceptable that the Chinese government can decide, according to its mood, which Web sites are censored and which are accessible," Reporters Without Borders said. "And how long will these sites be available to the 253 million

Chinese Internet users, who continue to be subject to massive online censorship?"

Reporters Without Borders also noted that the partial lifting of the censorship demonstrates the Chinese government is not completely insensitive to pressure. Leslie Harris, president and CEO of the Center for Democracy and Technology, agreed. The world, she said, needs to keep the pressure on.

"I have no expectation that China is going to fully open up its firewall, but this is an indication that if the world pays serious attention to this issue on a regular basis, and governments incorporate this issue into their trade negotiations and human-rights statements, we might be able to make some progress," Harris said. "We just need to focus on this beyond the Olympics. We can't just leave the Chinese people behind."

DHS Stays Mum on New 'Cyber Security' Center

The Bush administration's newly created National Cyber Security Center remains shrouded in secrecy, with officials refusing to release information about its budget, what contractors will run it, and how its mission relates to Internet surveillance.

In correspondence with the U.S. Senate posted on Thursday, the Bush administration said it would not provide that information publicly. An 18-page, partially redacted letter from DHS said that disclosure could affect "the conduct of federal programs, or other programs or operations essential to the interests of our nation."

The censored letter - a nonredacted, "For Official Use Only" version was provided to senators - came in response to queries from the top Democratic and Republican members of the Senate's Homeland Security committee.

Sen. Susan Collins, a Maine Republican, indicated that the nonredacted version satisfied her, at least for now. "Increased information sharing will benefit the department, Congress and the public, as well as the private-sector, which controls the vast majority of the nation's cyber infrastructure," Collins said in e-mail to CNET News. "It is my hope that the release of this information will assist in improving security in both the public and private sectors."

Sen. Joe Lieberman, an independent from Connecticut who caucuses with Democrats, did not respond to our queries on Thursday.

In March, DHS announced that Rod Beckstrom, 47, would be appointed as director of the National Cyber Security Center. Secretary Michael Chertoff said at the time that Beckstrom would "implement cyber security strategies in a cohesive way" and contribute to the "protection of federal networks and the security of our homeland."

Oddly, DHS seemed to change its mind about whether even the mere existence of the National Cyber Security Center was classified or not.

"On March 20th, you announced that Rod Beckstrom would be the director of the new National Cyber Security Center within DHS," Lieberman and

Collins said in a letter (PDF) to DHS in May. "Prior to this announcement, committee staff had been instructed that the existence of the NCSC was itself classified."

Their letter to DHS in May asked for a detailed account of the department's role in the Comprehensive National Cyber Security Initiative, noting a lack of information from the department, in spite of the fact that the administration had claimed that cybersecurity was one of Chertoff's "top four priorities for '08."

The DHS has requested an additional \$83 million for National Cyber Security Center for fiscal year 2009 (which begins in October 2009); including the \$115 million awarded for the initiative in 2008, that would increase its budget by \$200 million, tripling the amount the DHS has spent on cyber security since 2007.

The department's new National Cyber Security Center is taking the lead on the CNCI, a "multi-agency, multi-year plan to secure the federal government's cyber networks" that was established in January by a directive signed by President Bush. In the letter made public on Thursday, DHS described the center as a way to "coordinate and integrate information necessary to help secure U.S. cyber networks and systems and help foster collaboration among federal cyber groups," and serve as a "single location for all-source situational awareness about cyber activity and security status of the U.S. networks and systems."

Though just made public Thursday, the letter was initially sent to the senators on June 2. The subsequent redacted version eliminated the department's response to questions such as: "Why was the determination made that the contract will be for a 10-month period?" and "How will the DHS provide appropriate oversight to ensure that the contractors support efforts do not intrude on inherently governmental functions?"

One question left unanswered is how the National Cyber Security Center will interact with DHS's so-called Einstein program, which is designed to monitor Internet mischief and network disruptions aimed at federal agencies. (Not much about Einstein is public, but a privacy impact assessment offers some details.)

A Homeland Security spokeswoman told us in April that the primary focus of Einstein at the time was protecting federal-government networks - not monitoring the privately operated Internet, a move that would raise unique legal, technical, and privacy challenges.

The DHS letter refused to divulge any information about Einstein. It said: "Technological upgrades and planning activities are classified. DHS will be happy to provide the committee with a briefing in the appropriate (classified) setting."

U.S. Agents Can Seize Travelers' Laptops

U.S. federal agents have been given new powers to seize travelers' laptops and other electronic devices at the border and hold them for unspecified periods the Washington Post reported on Friday.

Under recently disclosed Department of Homeland Security policies, such seizures may be carried out without suspicion of wrongdoing, the

newspaper said, quoting policies issued on July 16 by two DHS agencies.

Agents are empowered to share the contents of seized computers with other agencies and private entities for data decryption and other reasons, the newspaper said.

DHS officials said the policies applied to anyone entering the country, including U.S. citizens, and were needed to prevent terrorism.

The measures have long been in place but were only disclosed in July, under pressure from civil liberties and business travel groups acting on reports that increasing numbers of international travelers had had their laptops, cellphones and other digital devices removed and examined.

The policies cover hard drives, flash drives, cell phones, iPods, pagers, beepers, and video and audio tapes - as well as books, pamphlets and other written materials, the report said.

The policies require federal agents to take measures to protect business information and attorney-client privileged material. They stipulate that any copies of the data must be destroyed when a review is completed and no probable cause exists to keep the information.

Web-to-mail Service Gets Around Work Site Bans

If your company blocks your favorite blog and you absolutely can't wait to read the latest post (and you don't have a smartphone capable of browsing), then a new site has a free solution for you.

Send WebToMail an e-mail (at send@webtomail.co.cc) with a URL as the subject, and a few minutes later you'll receive an HTML e-mail of that page. The e-mail won't look the same as the page in a browser, as it won't arrange menus and site navigation properly, but it includes images and works fine to read the content on the page.

It's both a sneaky and novel approach to getting around workplace site blocking - and WebToMail is entirely up-front about its goal. The first line of text at the site reads "Are you at job and you can only check your mails? This is your solution."

A whois lookup indicates that the co.cc domain is registered to someone in South Korea. If you're curious about trying the service but understandably leery about sending a site your e-mail address, try signing up for a throwaway Gmail or Yahoo account. Unless, of course, your workplace blocks those sites also.

As Killerstartups.com points out, if you want to view a link on the site you requested, you have to send another request and wait another few minutes, so this isn't a good option for any real surfing. I'd say it would be best for keeping up with new entries on a blog or forum.

Now, if you're the party-pooper responsible for creating and maintaining those site blocks and you want to close this particular loophole, simply block incoming e-mail from webtomail.co.cc at your mail server.

Comcast, NetZero Agree To Block Internet Child Porn

Internet service providers (ISPs) Comcast Corp and United Online Inc's NetZero have agreed to block access to child pornography, the New York Attorney General's office said on Tuesday.

The announcement comes a week after New York Attorney General Andrew Cuomo threatened to pursue legal action against Comcast Cable Communications LLC if it did not agree to reforms.

Several other ISPs, such as Verizon Communications Inc and Sprint Nextel Corp agreed in June to block Internet bulletin boards and websites nationwide that disseminate child porn.

"I commend the companies for working with my office to aggressively eradicate online child pornography and strongly urge all outstanding Internet service providers across New York and the nation to get on board," Cuomo said in a statement.

Other major ISPs that have signed on with Cuomo's initiatives include Time Warner Inc's AOL unit, AT&T Inc and Time Warner Cable Inc.

The companies have agreed to completely block access to all child porn news groups and said they will purge their servers of all child pornography websites identified by the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children.

United Online corporate counsel Brooke Squire said the company was "dedicated to eradicating this serious problem."

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